ALTERNATIVES

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the alternatives selected for analysis in the EIS. Each of the action alternatives includes both removal and rehabilitation actions. Analysis of a no action alternative is required by NEPA and establishes a baseline of comparison for the other action alternatives. The four alternatives are:

- No-Action Alternative
- Alternative A (Proposed Action)
- Alternative B
- Alternative C

Table 1 summarizes the key elements of the alternatives. The locations of all system components and resources along the route are provided in Appendix A; Project Resource Maps.

The original right of way grants for public and state lands in New Mexico, and California state and private lands crossed by the route provide AT&T with a right to remove cable and equipment. Because NEPA does not allow the segmenting of projects—for example, by whether the right to remove exists in certain locations—it was necessary to assume some cable and equipment removal would occur in these areas. Therefore, all of the action alternatives include a cable and/or equipment removal component consistent with the original terms of the right of way grants. Additional information on the generation and selection of alternatives can be found in Appendix B; Methods for Selecting a Range of Alternatives. A cost estimate for the action alternatives is provided in Appendix K.

DESCRIPTION OF ALTERNATIVES

No-Action Alternative

Features of the No-Action Alternative include:

- no cable or structural removal
- no rehabilitation actions (including no access elimination)
- AT&T retains easements for entire right of way along the project route (220.1 miles)
- AT&T continues to maintain and patrol right of way

Under the No-Action Alternative, AT&T would not relinquish its easements for lands associated with the coaxial cable and would continue to pay fees associated with the easements. No cable or equipment removal would occur and AT&T would continue to patrol and perform maintenance of the system consistent with the terms and conditions of the grants. Unrestricted use of the access road would continue by AT&T as well as by private and public groups to access lands along the route.

Analysis of a No-Action Alternative is required by NEPA and establishes a baseline for analysis of the action alternatives. The No-Action Alternative was not selected as the Proposed Action because it does not meet the agencies' purpose and need for the project.

Alternative A (Proposed Action)

The Proposed Action includes the removal of all cable segments and structures identified by AT&T in its Environmental Report, as well as the agencies' proposed rehabilitation actions, including elimination of 40 miles of the access corridor. A profile of cable and equipment removal segments is shown in Figure 8.

Alternative A—Major Features

- Cable removed: 174.5 mi.
- Repeater huts/manholes removed: 220 mi.
- Marker posts removed: 174.2 mi.
- Access corridor eliminated: 39.8 mi.
- Dual track eliminated: 4 mi.

Removal Actions

Cable Removal — A summary of the cable removal segments is provided in Table 2 and a more detailed profile of the segments is presented in Table 3.

New Mexico Segment — Near the Socorro Feed Station, the Proposed Action includes the removal of approximately 7.2 miles of coaxial cable along a 7.7 mile segment (from MP 0 to MP 41). Approximately 0.5 mile of cable along the 7.7 mile segment would not be removed because of cultural resource concerns. Property traversed by the project route in New Mexico is owned by the BLM and the State of New Mexico.

Nevada Segment — The project route in Nevada is approximately 7.4 miles long and is located in the southern portion of the state, south of Laughlin, Nevada. For 5.7 miles (from MP 6000 to MP 6036), the coaxial cable and an active fiber optic cable are parallel and in close proximity to each other; therefore, no cable would be removed. The Proposed Action includes the removal of approximately 1.7 miles of coaxial cable (from MP 6036 to MP 6047), where the fiber optic cable is not present. Property traversed by the project route in Nevada is owned by the BLM and the State of Nevada Colorado River Commission.

California Segment — The project route in California is approximately 205.2 miles long. The Proposed Action includes the removal of approximately 165.7 miles of coaxial cable where it is not close to an active fiber optic cable. No cable will be removed for 0.5 mile of the route over Desert Butte near California City because of topography. Property traversed by the project route in California is owned by the NPS, the BLM, the State of California, and private landowners.

Structure Removal — Permanent structures to be removed include repeater huts, manholes, and cable MPs. Fifty-five repeater huts and 57 manholes within the 220-mile project route would be removed as part of the Proposed Action. The repeater huts are located outside the cable easement on additional 100-foot by 100-foot easements, or on applicant fee-owned property. The manholes are located within the cable right of way. MPs would be removed from all segments where cable is removed and would remain where the cable is not removed.

One repeater hut and two manholes would be removed in New Mexico. Two repeater huts and two manholes would be removed in Nevada. Fifty-two repeater huts and 53 manholes would be removed in California. The location of all repeater hut sites and manholes are provided in Appendix A; Project Resource Maps.

Rehabilitation Actions. As previously stated, termination of easements would require efforts to promote the restoration of the land to the satisfaction of the jurisdictional agency, either the NPS or the BLM. Because the original grants for the right of way on federal lands do not include specific rehabilitation measures to be completed upon termination (BLM 1963, BLM 1963a, BLM 1964), the NPS has identified a range of rehabilitation actions that may be implemented. Federal lands affected by this requirement include the access corridor adjacent to the ROW and the 100-foot by 100-foot repeater hut sites. Rehabilitation of the access corridor and the repeater hut sites would include a range or combination of activities, such as recontouring to assist in restoring drainage patterns, soil preparation, access control, seeding, live plantings or other reasons. Additional land compensation may also be considered in lieu of some or all rehabilitation measures.

Rehabilitation refers to only to the implementation of the rehabilitation actions included in the Proposed Action to enhance the potential for revegetation and habitat recovery, and does not imply successful or complete restoration. Due to the difficulty inherent in promoting desert revegetation, it should not be assumed that the measures will necessarily result in partial or complete revegetation of disturbed areas over time. Rehabilitation actions are further discussed in Appendix C; Description of Construction Actions.

Rehabilitation would also include eliminating access along the access corridor to allow vegetation to recover in these areas. Since installation of the original coaxial cable in the early 1960s, the adjacent access corridor has become part of the network of travel routes in the Mojave Desert. The corridor also traverses desert tortoise critical habitat and several wilderness areas. The Proposed Action includes the elimination of the access corridor where the corridor is within desert tortoise critical habitat or in wilderness areas, and is not: 1) on private land, 2) used as a sole route of access to reach private land, 3) used to reach designated recreation sites or areas of high recreational value, 4) used by AT&T to patrol its fiber optic line along I-15, or used by other authorized users or 5) where elimination would affect nearby cultural resources, specifically the Mojave Road.

Repeater Hut Site Rehabilitation — The hut sites are generally barren. To promote revegetation and enhance the habitat values of these sites, the cleared area will be rehabilitated following structural removal.

Access Corridor Elimination and Rehabilitation — The Proposed Action includes the elimination of 39.8 miles of the access corridor where it crosses wilderness areas, and in desert tortoise critical habitat. This would reduce direct mortality impacts because of traffic, enhance recovery of desert tortoise habitat, and eliminate vehicular travel within wilderness areas. The information used to make this determination is presented in Appendix D; Access Information.

The proposed access elimination segments are shown on Figure 9 and Table 4. The access elimination segments include 4.1 miles of CDFG land, 9.2 miles in the BLM Barstow Resource Area, and 26.5 miles in the Mojave National Preserve. Rehabilitation of the access elimination segments is discussed in Appendix C; Description of Construction Actions.

Along certain portions of the corridor, dual tracks have developed where the corridor is extensively washboarded and traffic has diverted onto a second track. Access to 4.0 miles of dual tracks will be eliminated on federally owned critical habitat to minimize traffic affects on tortoise habitat. These segments of dual tracks are listed in Appendix D; Access Information. The measures used to eliminate this second track are discussed in Appendix C; Description of Construction Actions.

Easement Relinquishment. Once all removal actions, rehabilitation, required mitigation measures, and private land settlements are complete, AT&T would be able to relinquish approximately 174 miles of easements where cable is removed to the owners of the underlying land. Where the cable is parallel and in close proximity to AT&T's fiber optic cable, cable would remain in the ground, and the federal easements for the fiber optic line will be amended to include the residual coaxial cable and access. Once the fiber optic easements have been amended, the original federal easements for those areas where cable remains in the ground would be terminated by NPS and BLM. Maintenance activities by AT&T would continue along approximately 46 miles of the 220-mile project route. These activities would include monitoring the operating fiber optic cable, performing cable locates, responding to vandalism and theft reports, and responding to unauthorized digging.

Alternative B

This alternative excludes removing the cable from federal land in desert tortoise critical habitat, and eliminates more of the access corridor within critical habitat than the Proposed Action.

Alternative B—Major Features

- Cable removed: 113.7 mi.
- Repeater huts/manholes removed: 220 mi.
- Marker posts removed: 174.7
- Access corridor eliminated: 51.6 mi.
- Dual track eliminated: 4 mi.

Removal Actions.

Cable Removal — The project route crosses desert tortoise critical habitat for approximately 0.6 mile in Nevada and 100.8 miles in California. The critical habitat in Nevada is on land owned by the BLM. The critical habitat in California includes land owned by the NPS (28.7 miles), the BLM (38.0 miles), the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG)(4.1 miles), and private owners (30.1 miles).

Alternative B includes leaving the cable in the ground in federally owned critical habitat, as well as in those areas where the cable will remain because of the presence of the parallel fiber optic line in close proximity. Cable would be removed from private and state lands within critical habitat because the applicant's grants provide a right of removal in these areas. Outside of critical habitat, the cable removal segments would be the same as the Proposed Action.

Because of the checkerboard pattern of ownership in the California Desert, this alternative includes a dispersed set of removal segments as the route passes through federally owned and private parcels in critical habitat areas. Removal segments are listed in Table 5; Alternative B, Summary of Cable Removal Segments. The removal segments are shown on Figure 10: Alternative B, Cable Removal Segments.

Structure Removal — Repeater huts and access vaults would be removed from the entire 220-mile project route as in the Proposed Action. Cable MPs would be removed from all segments, except where the coaxial cable is parallel and in close proximity to the fiber optic line.

Rehabilitation Actions.

Repeater Hut Site Rehabilitation — Rehabilitation will be similar to the Proposed Action, except that access control at some repeater hut sites will not be necessary because these sites would be located within the additional access elimination segments.

Access Corridor Elimination and Rehabilitation — Approximately 51.6 miles of access elimination are included in Alternative B. The access elimination segments include all of those mentioned for the Proposed Action, and 11.9 miles of additional segments in critical habitat (see Table 6 and Figure 11). These 11.9 additional miles are portions of the access corridor excluded from elimination in the Proposed Action due to their current use by the public to reach recreational sites or areas of high recreational value. The determination of the elimination segments is based on the information presented in Appendix D; Access Information.

Rehabilitation of the 51.6 miles of the access corridor would comprise the measures stated in the Proposed Action. In addition, 4.0 miles of dual tracks would also be eliminated in the same areas as the Proposed Action. Some of these dual tracks areas coincide with the access elimination segments in this alternative. Where the corridor has dual tracks and is proposed for elimination, both tracks would be eliminated and rehabilitated.

Easement Relinquishment. Because cable would be left in the ground on federal property, in order for AT&T to relinquish its easements, the federal agencies and AT&T would need to reach an agreement regarding liability for cable that remains in the ground that is satisfactory to both parties. Provided this occurs, AT&T could relinquish its easements as discussed under the Proposed Action.

Alternative C

Alternative C—Major Features

- Cable removed: 72.3 mi.
- Repeater huts/manholes removed: 220 mi.
- Marker posts removed: 174.7
- Access corridor eliminated: 5.4 mi.
- Dual track eliminated: 4 mi.

This alternative excludes removing cable on federal lands, and only eliminates the access corridor where it crosses designated wilderness.

Removal Actions.

Cable Removal — Alternative C includes leaving the cable in the ground on federally owned land in California and Nevada, as well as in those areas where the cable would remain because of the presence of the parallel fiber optic line in close proximity. Cable would be removed from private and state lands because the applicant's grants provide a right of removal in these areas. Cable removal would include 7.2 miles in New Mexico on BLM and state lands, and 65.0 miles in California on state and private lands.

Because of the checkerboard pattern of ownership in the California Desert, this alternative would consist of a dispersed set of removal sections as the route passes through federally owned and private parcels. Removal segments are listed in Table 7: Alternative C, Summary of Cable Removal Segments. The removal segments are shown on Figure 12; Alternative C, Cable and Equipment Removal Segments.

Structure Removal — Repeater huts and access vaults would be removed from the entire 220-mile project route as in the Proposed Action. Cable MPs would be removed from all segments, except where the coaxial cable is parallel in close proximity to the fiber optic line.

Rehabilitation Actions.

Repeater Hut Site Rehabilitation — Rehabilitation would be similar to the Proposed Action, except that access control requirements at huts where access remained would be more intensive, because of more residual access along the corridor (i.e., less access elimination would occur).

Access Corridor Elimination and Rehabilitation — Approximately 5.4 miles of access elimination are included in the Alternative C. The corridor crosses 8.1 miles of wilderness in the Mojave National Preserve. Approximately 2.7 miles of the corridor on the west side of Soda Lake, within the Mojave Wilderness, are used by CalNev Pipe Line Company and AT&T to patrol its other utility lines. Thus, this alternative eliminates access within wilderness areas, except for the 2.7 miles on the west side of Soda Lake (see Table 8 below, and Figure 13).

Rehabilitation of 5.4 miles of the access corridor would include the measures stated in the Proposed Action. In addition, 4.0 miles of dual tracks would be eliminated in the same areas and rehabilitated by the same methods noted for the Proposed Action.

Easement Relinquishment. Because cable would be left in the ground on federal property, in order for AT&T to relinquish its easements, the federal agencies and AT&T would need to reach an agreement regarding liability for cable that remains in the ground that is satisfactory to both parties. Provided this occurs, AT&T could relinquish its easements as discussed under the Proposed Action.

DESCRIPTION OF ACTIONS, MITIGATIONS, AND SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS FOR ALL ACTION ALTERNATIVES

The construction activities for the alternatives are similar in type, but different in location and quantity. Rehabilitation actions would occur at the repeater hut sites and along the access corridor with specific methodologies based on the rehabilitation measures selected. Additional information on construction methods and practices common to all action alternatives can be found in Appendix C: Description of Construction Actions. A summary of mitigation measures related to removal and rehabilitation actions is provided in Appendix G. A summary of significant adverse impacts and beneficial impacts (after mitigation) for each alternative is provided in Table 9.